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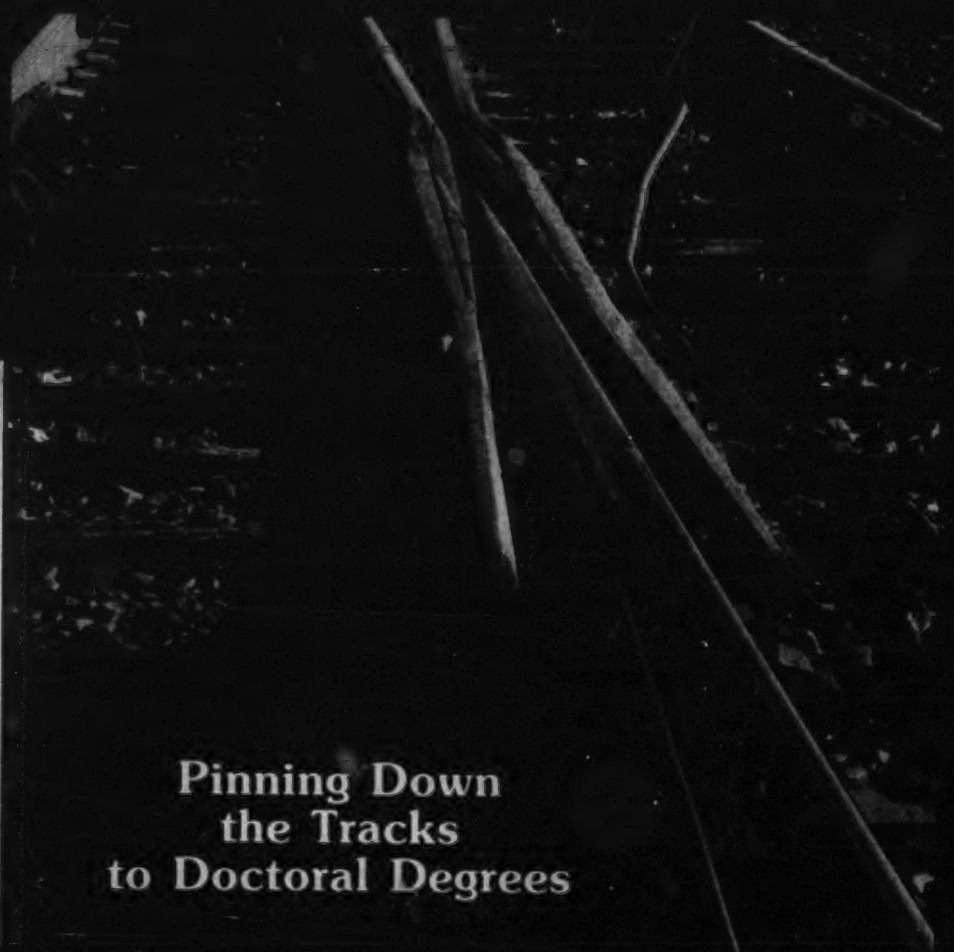

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## Pinning Down the Tracks to Doctoral Degrees

Official Publication of the National League for Nursing

# Nursing & HEALTH CARE

VOLUME 9, NUMBER 5 MAY 1988


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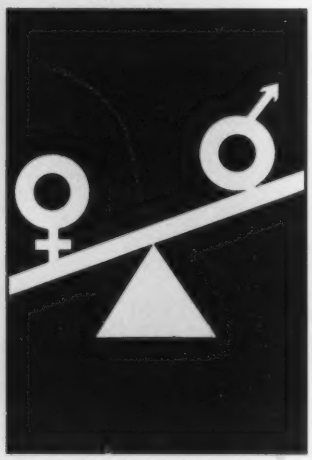

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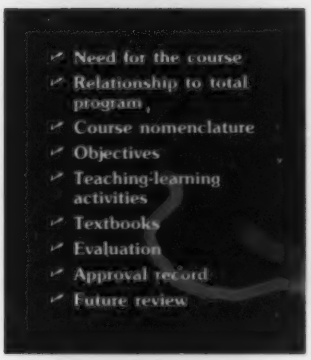


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NURSING & HEALTH CARE offers diverse views on subjects of interest to readers. Articles represent the opinions of individual contributing authors and are not necessarily those of the National League for Nursing.

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# Nursing Supply and Demand: An Analysis of Newspapers, Journals, and Newsletters

PERI ROSENFELD
EVELYN B. MOSES

Toward the end of 1986, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Nursing began to hear from a number of nursing employers that it was becoming difficult to hire registered nurses. At the same time, newspaper articles began to report on the labor market conditions of registered nurses.

The Division of Nursing wanted to research the current nursing employment situation. The complexities involved in statistical surveys would lead to lags in making available up-to-date information. However, a systematic approach to collecting and classifying available information could assist in identifying the current nursing employment situation.

Since major newspapers, as well as nursing and other health media, seemed to be increasing coverage on nursing employment related issues, the approach taken was to examine newspaper, journal, and newsletter articles on employers' ability to hire RNs, available nursing positions, and nurses' ability to get positions.

The Division of Nursing chose the National League for Nursing (NLN) to carry out this project. The articles collected were assessed to determine whether there were specific geographic or nursing specialty labor market indicators. If underlying causes were identified they were abstracted and summarized.

## Study Methodology

Materials were acquired through an on-line search, phone requests, and personal contacts. The on-line bibliographic search produced the majority of items included in this study. The search covered a variety of media, including newspapers, nursing and nonnursing journals and newsletters, and covered a wide range of geographic areas. However, the on-line search yielded material in larger metropolitan areas, in contrast to smaller, rural locations.

To compensate for this limitation of the on-line search and to balance its "big city" bias, newspapers in smaller cities were identified through *Editors & Publishers*, a directory that lists all newspapers published in the United States. Representatives from these newspapers in underrepresented states and regions were contacted by phone and many were cooperative.

The third, less methodical avenue for data collection was through library research at NLN and the American Journal of Nursing Company. Moreover, interested parties (e.g., NLN staff and members) assisted by collecting items which were appropriate for inclusion. This method yielded the fewest items. However, it led to representation of some geographic areas which would not have been represented in the study otherwise. Most of the journal and newsletter articles were obtained in this way.

A total of 57 newspapers were included in the study, producing a total of 276 individual articles. Newspapers from 30 states and more than 45 cities were represented.

In order to provide as much information as possible to present a cogent gauge of nursing employment trends, the analysis was based on materials collected from March 1986 through May 1987.

Although the initial plan called for a one-year review, once the items were arranged in chronological order the need to extend the time frame became apparent. Most importantly, the fre-

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*Table 1. Articles on Nursing Employment by Number and Percent*

| Type of Article | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| News items on nursing | 187 | 68 |
| News items where nursing is secondary | 31 | 11 |
| Letters and editorials | 50 | 18 |
| AHA newswire report* | 8 | 3 |
| | 276 | 100 |

*Eight newspapers carried almost verbatim versions of the American Hospital Association's news release of its RN vacancy rate study. All eight appeared in January 1987.

*Table 2. Number and Percent of Nursing News Articles by Type of Facility*

| Type of Facility | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Hospitals | 125 | 67 |
| Nursing schools | 25 | 13 |
| Long-term care/nursing homes | 18 | 10 |
| Other | 19 | 10 |
| | 187 | 100 |

quency of printed news items on nursing employment opportunities increased over time and jumped dramatically in 1987. In fact, when the time frame was extended two more months—to May 1987—an additional 75 newspaper items appeared in the review.

Sixty three percent (174 items) of the total number of newspaper articles under review appeared between January and May 1987. The remaining 37 percent appeared in the ten-month period from March to December 1986.

In short, January 1987 was a turning point. From that point forward considerably more references concerning nursing employment opportunities were found in the media. This surge coincided with the American Hospital Association's (AHA) news release about RN vacancy rates in hospitals.

A smaller peak in the number of published articles occurred in August 1986. At that time, the National Institutes of Health reduced the number of beds in its clinical settings because of a lack of nurses. Institute officials attributed this to an inability to pay their nurses competitively. Concurrently, an article on the findings of NLN's annual survey and the closing of a prestigious nursing school appeared in *The Washington Post*, prompting interest in the availability of nursing personnel.

Media from nine census regions were represented in the survey sample. An examination of variations in the coverage given to the nursing situation in each region was made by comparing the average number of articles printed per region to the national average. There were 275 articles printed in 56 newspapers nationwide, producing an average of 4.8 articles per newspaper. (The one article from the nationally circulated *USA Today* was eliminated from this analysis.) The Mid Atlantic region produced the highest average, with 6.9 articles per paper. The smallest average number of articles per newspaper appeared in the East South Central, West South Central, and Mountain regions with 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5 articles, respectively.

The sample also took into consideration the size of the populations served by the newspapers under review. Using data from the Bureau of the Census, each newspaper's hometown was categorized according to size of population. Six population categories were established, ranging from under 50,000 to over one million, and the location of each newspaper was entered accordingly.

Within these six categories, media attention was given in 46 geographic locations, all of which are represented in this study. An examination of the average number of articles published per location showed that the larger the city the more media attention was paid to nursing issues. The mean number of articles printed per location nationwide was 6.0. The population categories *500,000 to 1 million* and *over 1 million* produced means of 10.7 and 10.8 articles per city, respectively.

Each newspaper article was read and evaluated in a variety of ways. Moreover, each article was evaluated by two individuals, the project director and the research assistant, to ensure a high degree of interrater reliability.

The discussion of how the data analysis was conducted will serve two functions. First, by describing how each article was sorted and resorted, the reader will understand the underlying logic and process of the analysis. Second, the detailed descriptions will progressively narrow down the articles, thereby isolating those pieces that provide the most significant contributions to our understanding of recent nursing issues. A flow chart of the data analysis process appears in Figure 1.

It is important to keep in mind that the analysis was based on the information as reported in newspaper articles. In other words, this discussion refers directly to what was written by journalists, without the evaluation of the authors of this report. In short, no attempt was made to evaluate or judge the information gleaned from the articles, but simply to report what was found.

The overwhelming majority of articles describing the nursing situation presume the existence of a shortage. Even in those areas where concrete evidence of a shortage is not available, the term "nursing shortage" appears.

The journalistic parlance favors terms such as "critical," "crisis," and "emergency." Perhaps these phrases are used because they convey some commonly held attitudes about medical care.

In the first step of the analysis each item was sorted to determine what type of article it was in relation to nursing. Four broad categories of *type of article* were established (Table 1).

A total of 39 letters to the editor and 11 editorials were included in this study. Letters and editorials were largely in response to articles published earlier. The most frequent topic authors dealt with in these letters and editorials was stress-related working conditions for nurses. The second most frequent topic for letters was the titling and licensure issue.

The 31 articles considered as *news where nursing is secondary* fell into several subcategories. Most often nursing was discussed in the articles as part of the overall health care system—specifically in terms of the overall "escalation of medical costs" or "deterioration of the nation's health

care." Nursing also came up in articles describing general employment and career opportunities in the American economy. A third type of article in which nursing was of secondary concern focused on women's issues such as "comparable worth."

The largest category of articles in the sample comprised those that emphasized specific information pertaining to nurses' ability to find employment or employers' ability to fill nursing positions. For the remainder of this report, emphasis will be placed on the 187 news items pertaining to specific nursing employment concerns.

Each of the 187 nursing news items were also sorted by type of facility (Table 2).

The 19 items coded as other were primarily descriptions of the activities or accomplishments of a particular nurse or group of nurses. The 18 articles focusing on long-term care and nursing homes can be primarily attributed to New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

The second largest type of facility category produced 25 articles dealing with the condition of the nation's nursing schools and were often cast in the light of contemporary and future nursing supply. More specifically, reporters were likely to blame the perceived nursing shortage on falling enrollments in nursing schools.

Reports of the closure of nursing programs (e.g., American University, University of Nebraska, Lincoln campus, and Boston University) were likely to be accompanied by discussions on how these closures will exacerbate an already growing problem in recruiting RNs. Other articles described how nursing schools were redesigning and expanding their programs to recruit more applicants and to help forestall the current shortage.

Articles pertaining to hospitals comprised the largest type of facility category. The 125 news items so identified excluded those that only reported the AHA RN vacancy study without reporting on other aspects.

By and large, these articles on hospital nursing can be assigned to several broad classifications: stories of recruitment efforts on the part of hospitals; stories of the impact of insufficient numbers of nurses on hospitals, wards, or units; and general discussion of factors affecting recent nursing employment issues. While many articles deal with more than one of these themes, each can be categorized by its primary focus (Table 3).

*Table 3. Primary Focus of Hospital Articles by Number and Percent*

| Primary Focus of Hospital Articles | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Recruitment | 55 | 44 |
| Impact | 34 | 29 |
| Discussion | 36 | 27 |
| | 125 | 100 |

*Table 4. Number of Articles with Hospital Focus by Availability of Budgeted RN Positions*

| Articles with Hospital Focus | N | Vacant Budgeted Positions | Availability of Positions Unclear |
|---|---|---|---|
| Increased recruitment (all strategies combined) | 55 | 36 | 19 |
| Diversion of patients | 9 | 9 | – |
| Closure of beds | 9 | 6 | *3 |
| General discussion of demand for nurses | 36 | 19 | 17 |
| Other impact | 16 | 6 | 10 |
| | 125 | 76 | 49 |

*These 3 articles clearly state that there is an insufficient number of positions available.

Within each of these broad categories, several additional variables were identified for further analysis. First, a key factor in understanding the nature of the nursing situation being reported is to determine whether hospitals are seeking to fill vacant budgeted positions or if there are insufficient numbers of budgeted positions available. Each article that made any mention of a nursing shortage was carefully reviewed to determine if nursing positions were available or not.

Second, in the area of recruitment, specific or unusual strategies—particularly in the areas of foreign recruitment, monetary incentives, and salary increases—were highlighted for further discussion.

Third, when possible, objective indices of a nursing shortage, (such as hospital study results), were explored in those instances where a shortage was said to exist.

Fifty-five articles dealt specifically with the recruitment strategies hospitals are using to attract nurses to their organizations. Throughout the nation, there were similarities in the news stories. Recruitment of foreign nurses—specifically from Canada, the United Kingdom and the Phillipines—was the most frequently reported approach to filling vacant positions. Another approach featured in the news reports involved monetary incentives, bonuses, and salary increases. Most of these news items specifically referred to filling vacant positions. Less than 10 percent of the recruitment articles referred to "salary wars" where bonuses were being offered "just in case." Also under the category of recruitment were articles reporting that hospitals were making greater use of registries and temporary agencies to fill their open positions.

## Impact on Hospitals

The second classification of articles pertaining to hospitals produced 34 reports of hospitals that were forced to close beds, divert patients, or take some other serious action to cope with insufficient numbers of RNs. Nine of these news items referred to the need to close beds or units, and all reported that the lack of nurses was due to an inability to fill budgeted positions (see Table 4).

An additional nine articles reported the diversion of patients due to insufficient RNs. Six of these reports indicated that these diversions were the result of hospitals' inability to recruit RNs to fill vacant budgeted positions.

Another nine news stories describe labor disputes that were triggered off

or influenced by a perceived nursing shortage. Six of these reports indicated that protesting nurses have been adversely affected by the numerous unfilled budgeted positions.

The remaining articles referred to reports of possible decertification and loss of licenses of hospitals due to insufficient numbers of nursing staff. These reports more likely referenced the need to create additional positions to relieve under staffing.

*Representatives of national health care organizations were more likely than local representatives to be interviewed in journal and newsletter articles.*

Thirty-six articles were categorized as general discussions of recent nursing employment issues. As noted earlier, the underlying assumption of these articles was that a nursing shortage existed and that the demand for nurses was "critical." Just over half these articles (N = 19) make claims of a nursing shortage by citing the number of vacant RN positions at a particular hospital or geographic area. These articles often report findings from studies made by representatives of state hospital associations and individual hospitals. In the remaining 17 general discussion articles, it is unclear whether or not the perceived shortage is one of unfilled budgeted positions.

When all news items were sorted, reports on hospitals' need for registered nurses were most prevalent. Two-thirds of the articles specifically described nursing problems in hospitals. In view of the fact that hospitals are the largest employers of nurses and that almost seven out of ten RNs are employed in hospital settings, this finding is not surprising.

The 64 journals and newsletter articles failed to produce any significant information that was not also covered in the newspapers. In fact, journal and newsletter articles were likely to cite the same newspaper articles reviewed in this study. Moreover, representatives of national health care organizations were more likely than local representatives to be interviewed in those articles.

Newspaper coverage of nursing employment opportunities, particularly reports of hospital recruitment efforts and general discussions of nursing supply, intensified over time. Indeed, after the deadline for inclusion in this study, there was continued interest among reporters in nursing employment.

A look at the number of articles printed about nursing employment over time revealed that over 65 percent of the 125 articles categorized as pertaining to hospitals appeared after January 1987. This suggested that the AHA report on the national RN vacancy rates whetted the appetites of reporters to investigate the availability of nurses. Moreover, local hospital associations were prompted to conduct studies of nursing vacancy rates in their area.

The frequently heard claims that employers of nurses were having difficulty recruiting and retaining RNs did not necessarily address where the problem lay. When journalists reported that a hospital or nursing home had an insufficient number of RNs, it was not always clear whether the agency had vacant budgeted positions available or if it needed to increase the number of RN positions.

However, based on the newspaper reports reviewed for this study, approximately 60 percent of the articles referring to hospitals used terms such as "vacant," "open" or "unfilled position" to describe the need for nurses. This suggested that the majority of reports claimed the inadequate number of nurses as due to an inability to recruit and retain nurses for budgeted positions.

Since the completion of this project, media interest has continued to focus on the nursing employment situation. Moreover, a variety of local, state and federal initiatives have been undertaken to address this problem. The collection of data, both quantitative and qualitative, has increased since the initiation of this project, and the same is true for the number of analyses devoted to aspects of this subject. This project, therefore, is one of the earliest among those surrounding the issues involved in the employment and availability of nursing personnel in the mid-1980s.


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